

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE FILING CABINET IS FULL

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1. The filing cabinet is stuffed to overflowing. We need to make some decisions about our archival records. What is the first step?

The records in that filing cabinet are nothing less than the memory of your organization. We appreciate your desire to take care of these important records and we are here to help you. The *Association for Manitoba Archives* believes that all Manitobans have a stake in assuring that significant records of our community life are safeguarded now and in the future. Through the *Archives Advisory Service* we help Manitobans to understand the options available in caring for their archives and to select the best archival strategy for their needs. Together we can work to preserve these records now, so that they can offer a picture of your organization's activities well into the future.

But which documents should be kept? Separating the archival records from the rest and assessing the value of a collection is the first step in the archival process. Since archival records of tomorrow are being created today, you cannot fully appraise your archival

records without making a sober assessment of your overall record keeping procedures. Take another look at that filing cabinet.

Only about 5% of the records in these drawers have permanent value. These are the documents that record important legal transactions, administrative changes or contain vital historical information. These records are your archives.

The other 95% were created for a specific administrative purpose. After that purpose has been achieved - usually in two or three years - these records have no further use and can be destroyed.

It is a lot of work to sort through non-current records to find out which ones are eligible for long-term preservation. Most records that will eventually become archival can be designated archival when they are first created. This is an essential part of a good records management program.

1. What does records management have to do with archives?

Records management is an indispensable tool for modern organizations whether profit or not-for-profit, small or large. It means, simply, that every file, form, letter, report, invoice, financial record - every piece of paper, computer file, photograph, video or blue-print generated and received by the organization during the course of everyday business - is subject to systematic planning. It means that the organization develops an efficient filing system geared to meet its particular needs. Classes of records should be scheduled to assess their lifetime as active records. When these records cease to be useful on a daily basis, the records schedule indicates whether they can be destroyed or kept permanently.

Ideally, records management results in regular culling of non-current files, efficient work flow and use of storage space, and a firm managerial grip on the paper explosion. It also results in archival records that are complete and well organized, with regular additions to the archival collection as records cease to be used on a daily basis.

The Archives Advisory Service can provide advice on the establishment of a records management program.

2. Do archives require special care?

Because archival documents contain information that must be available on a long-term basis, their care and maintenance presents special problems. By their very nature, archival documents are unique. Once destroyed, the information they contain is lost forever. In response to these challenges a whole body of techniques and theory has developed and a profession along with them. Archivists are individuals with training in archival management and techniques who appraise records for archival value, preserve, and make them available to researchers.

The physical care and maintenance of archival collections is a core function of any archival institution. Documents are endangered by harmful agents such as water, fire, light, insects, and rodents and extremes of temperature and humidity. As well, the very composition of modern paper makes its long-term preservation difficult. Research shows, for example, that modern poor quality chemical wood pulp paper may disintegrate after only eighty years. Other media on which information is stored photographs, microfilm, computer tape and disks also present daunting problems. Highly trained conservators work with the Archives Advisory Service to provide clients with advice on the physical care of archival documents.

4. How can we provide this special care?

Good management of archival collections requires planning and the investment of time and money. But at the end of the process the archives will become a valuable source of information now and in the future.

There are basically two options for the care and maintenance of your archival collection:

1. Legal authority statement of purpose
2. Maintain your own archival records.

The preliminary appraisal of your archival collection should answer questions about the significance of the records. Are the records valuable mainly as the record of your organization's activities over the years? Or do the records contain information that is important to the history of the whole town, city, region or field of expertise? If the records are mainly of significance to your organization, maintaining them yourself is the most realistic course. If the documents have a wider significance, an established archives may be interested in acquiring them.

In making this kind of appraisal, it is very useful to have an outside opinion. The Archives Advisory Service will be happy to help you in this preliminary appraisal of your records. Armed with a basic idea of the archival value of your collection, you will be able to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the two options.

Option 1. Offer your records to an established archival institution.

There are over forty established archives in Manitoba representing a wide range of collection interests. Regional, municipal, religious, corporate, military and university archives are well-represented in the membership of the Association for Manitoba Archives. The Archives Advisory Service can put you in touch with an established archives. (In recommending an established archives, the Archives Advisory Service gives preference to those institutions that have achieved recognized status. See page 6 for an explanation of recognized status.)

Advantages:

There will be continuity of care. The collection will be preserved and made accessible on a long-term basis.

Expert assistance will be available to appraise and preserve your records.

You can have access to the collection at any time during regular working hours.

Since the archives normally bears most of the cost of maintaining the collection, this may be the most economical solution for you.

Disadvantages:

You may have to relinquish ownership of the material

The archives you choose may be some distance away

This may be the easiest option. However, archival institutions have to be selective in acquiring collections. The staff of the archives will appraise your records. If the material is compatible with the archives acquisition policy, they will welcome the collection as a valuable addition. A word of caution is necessary: the archives can only make sense of your collection if you maintain the records well. You will need to establish an on-going relationship with the archives to arrange for regular transfers of further archival material in the future.

Option 2. Maintain your own archival records, keeping them safe and in good order.

The Archives Advisory Service can work with you in appraising records for archival value, assessing the quality of your current storage area, and providing information on the management of your archival records.

Advantages:

Maintaining your own archival collection is good for your corporate image

You retain ownership of the records

You can have access to the records at any time

The records can be used for anniversaries, publications, fund-raising, etc.

Disadvantages:

Care of archival records tends to be a low organizational priority. People may remove material from the collection for their immediate needs, damaging or losing it in the process

Providing secure storage space that protects the material from water, fire, light and

extremes of temperature and humidity will be expensive

There are persuasive reasons for keeping your archival records. However, maintaining your archival records on-site will only make sense if you or your organization can make a long-term commitment to their care. That means:

- assigning a board or executive officer to be responsible for them. (In other words, a position, not a person)

- establishing your archival policy via an amendment to your constitution or similar formal declaration

- arranging a safe and secure place to store them

- ensuring that records management policies earmark records eligible for permanent safekeeping

- arranging and describing the archival records accurately so that you can find information quickly

Even small not-for-profit organizations with no paid staff can undertake these actions. You do not need to provide all the expertise yourself. But you should be willing to invest both time and money to achieve a well-managed archival collection.

So far we have been talking about one organization caring for its own archives. In certain circumstances a number of organizations may choose to work together to establish a recognized archives. This is an option that could be considered by several organizations with interests in common, by a large town or by a group of rural municipalities some distance from an established archives.

5. What is a recognized archives?

The Association for Manitoba Archives encourages both new and established archives to improve their standards of archival management. The Association has established basic criteria in seven key areas of archival care. Organizations must meet or exceed these minimum criteria to obtain institutional membership in the Association. These institutional members are Manitoba's recognized archives.

The basic criteria are:

LEGAL AUTHORITY AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE in public law or private resolution passed by the governing body of the public authority or private organization in which the archives is a unit of responsibility.

DESIGNATED PERSON who is accountable for the archives operation, management of its records holdings, and has taken or is pursuing a basic training course in archival practice.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING for the archives from the governing body of the public authority or private organization, sufficient to carry out its declared purpose.

SECURE, DESIGNATED SPACE for storage and handling of records, adequately protected from the degradation of agents such as water, fire, light, and extremes of temperature and humidity.

ACQUISITION POLICY, prepared in accordance with Canadian Council of Archives guidelines.

RECORDS ARRANGEMENT procedures which observe archival principles of provenance and original order.

A written ACCESS POLICY specifying public hours and procedures for using records.

6. How can we get further information?

The Association for Manitoba Archives offers a full range of programs to assist both archives and archivists, including:

advice and expertise from the Archives Advisory Services in all areas of archival management.

a self-study guide to help institutions improve their archival management standards

the Association for Manitoba Archives Newsletter, a forum for news and commentary on the Manitoba archival scene

workshops, lectures and panel discussions on various aspects of current archival concern.